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FM AMEMBASSY PORT AU PRINCE
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6526
INFO RUEHZH/HAITI COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHBR/AMEMBASSY BRASILIA PRIORITY 1592
RUEHSA/AMEMBASSY PRETORIA PRIORITY 1411
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STATE FOR WHA/EX AND WHA/CAR
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SUBJECT: MANGO MAYHEM: REACTION TO THE HAITI-US SUSPENSION
OF IMPORTS

PORT AU PR 00001239 001.2 OF 002

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: The U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) suspension of mango imports from Haiti has dominated the news since first announced on July 2. The suspension jeopardizes export earnings for thousands of independent growers throughout the country. State Secretary for Agriculture Joanas Gue has been the most outspoken GoH official, aggressively attempting to shift blame for the suspension to the United States, leading to some rumor mongering that the U.S. seeks to undermine Haiti. However, media coverage shifted to efforts of USDA's Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service (APHIS) personnel to re-certify mango shipment plants after their arrival on July 8, and informed Haitians, notably Prime Minister Alexis, expressed appreciation to the Ambassador for the swift USG efforts to lift the suspension. APHIS re-certified four of Haiti's nine mango processing plants, which should be able to resume shipments by July 17. Gue's attacks and the Haitian rumor mill notwithstanding, Haitians accept that problems regularly arise in their poor country. But they do expect the big brother to the north to solve these types of problems, and quickly. End summary.

12. (U) The USDA suspended mango imports from Haiti after discovering fruit fly larvae in crates imported into Florida from three of Haiti's nine approved packing facilities. Mangos are Haiti's second largest export after coffee, accounting for \$23 million in earnings annually and providing income to over 500,000 mango growers, some of whom cultivate single trees.

MEA CULPA?

13. (U) Coming at the height of the mango season, with the bulk of export earnings in jeopardy, public reaction and media attention was immediate and intense. Secretary of State for Agriculture, Joanas Gue, took the lead in responding for the GoH. In multiple radio interviews, he first attempted to deflect blame from the government by claiming that the larvae originated in the U.S. in empty

packing materials re-used in Haiti (an impossibility, our APHIS colleagues inform us). In subsequent statements he claimed that since every step of the treatment process from start to finish is supervised by American technicians, Haitian processors were blameless for any contamination. The general level of Gue's comments fueled a predictable level of conspiracy theorizing on Haiti's numerous radio chat shows that the U.S. sought to weaken Haiti's economy. Reports of farmers dumping truckloads of mangos on local markets and a price collapse added to the crisis mood.

14. (U) With the arrival of the APHIS team on July 8, however, media focus shifted to coverage of their visits to the various processing plants. At the same time, plant owners, growers, and informed Haitian officials conveyed to the Embassy their desire to cooperate with us to identify and resolve problems as quickly as possible. By July 14, APHIS' successful inspection of six of the nine processing plants had alleviated the air of crisis surrounding the story. Prime Minister Alexis, himself an agronomist, on July 16 thanked the Ambassador during a meeting in his office for the intense efforts of APHIS personnel and expressed understanding of the need to control fruit fly infestations.

NOW WHAT?

15. (U) The APHIS team leader on July 16 reported the team hoped to finish follow-on visits to the six plants originally targeted for re-certification. APHIS strategy was to inspect the six plants not implicated in the contaminated shipments to Florida, in the hope that those re-certifications could be completed more quickly. Of those six plants, APHIS

PORT AU PR 00001239 002.2 OF 002

determined that only one met the necessary standards to control fruit flies. Three others have taken steps to correct flaws in their processing, and the team will revisit the remaining two plants in the following two days. APHIS recommended to Washington on July 15 that the four plants be allowed to resume shipments. APHIS will address plants that sent the contaminated shipments during a follow-on visit beginning July 22. Youri Latortue, Senator of the Artibonite region, suggested forming a separate investigative team headed-up by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in order to protect the "francis mango," a type of mango indigenous to Gros-Morne, a town under his jurisdiction.

16. (SBU) Comment: Since first organizing the export certification for mangos in 1986, APHIS has worked almost exclusively with the mango shippers association to certify plants, train local inspectors, and maintain order in the program, while the ministry of agriculture has played virtually no role. Thus from a cover-yourself standpoint, State Secretary Gue's stance was both misinformed and unnecessary. He has been acting as agricultural minister since Minister Severin has been in poor health for most of Preval's term. Gue is close to Preval and actively campaigned for his Lespwa coalition prior to the national elections. Gue's aggressive nationalist stance on the mango issue probably betrays further political ambitions.

17. (SBU) Comment Continued: We do not believe that Gue's finger-pointing had much impact on the Haitian public beyond those already inclined to blame the U.S. for Haiti's woes. Haitians are accustomed to things not always working as they should, and our swift response to resolve the mango issue gained us much credit among the involved parties. On the other hand, Haitians do expect the U.S. to come to their rescue when bilateral problems arise; and our image here often depends on our willingness to do just that.

SANDERSON